

VZCZCXRO9842

PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN  
RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHSI #1241/01 1991343  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 171343Z JUL 08  
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9771  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001241

SIPDIS

DEPT. FOR EUR/CARC, PRM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: IDP RETURNEES TO GALI FACE CHALLENGES BEYOND  
SECURITY

REF: TBILISI 2146

11. Summary and Comment: Poloff traveled to the largely ethnic-Georgian Gali district of the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia June 23-25 to learn more about the lives of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had returned to their homes. Many of the estimated 40,000 IDPs who have returned to Gali depend on subsistence agriculture, hazelnut and mandarin farming, and small-scale trading of everyday goods. They have either returned to their own homes or have moved into the home of a relative, though many of the homes in the region have been destroyed. Many of the IDPs that remain displaced inside Georgia proper have not returned because of a combination of factors: their homes were destroyed during the war, lack of economic opportunities, safety, and ongoing Abkhaz hostility to the return of ethnic Georgians north of Gali. UN police stationed in Gali report that crime rates dropped last year, though there are still seasonal spikes in crime during the hazelnut harvest in October.

12. Summary and Comment continued: Many of the ethnic Georgians who fled Gali during the war returned within a few years, only to flee again when hostilities resumed in 1998. President Saakashvili's disbanding of the Georgian government-backed paramilitary groups following his election in 2003 and an extensive demining program (partially funded by the USG) along the Inguri river vastly improved the security situation in Gali, paving the way for large-scale return of IDPs there. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that approximately 40,000 IDPs have returned since 2003. The timely return of the remaining 230,000 IDPs remains a key priority for the Georgian government, though creating the conditions for safe and voluntary return will be a challenge. The Abkhaz remain strongly opposed to IDP return north of Gali out of concern they will become a minority in their own "country." Property disputes, lack of housing, decaying infrastructure and a stagnant, corrupt economy point to millions of dollars and years of rehabilitation before most would be willing to call Abkhazia home again. End Summary and Comment.

Many IDPs have limited options

-----  
13. Poloff spoke with IDPs on both sides of the conflict zone, both returnees and those still displaced, to get an accurate picture of conditions for each group. Many of the IDPs originally from Gali live in Zugdidi, on the Georgian side of the conflict zone, surviving on a 27 lari (USD 19) a month stipend from the Georgian government. Most occasionally return to visit relatives, mainly grandparents, living in Gali, but otherwise stay on the Georgian side living in remote, dilapidated collective centers or renting rooms from local families. Those fortunate enough to have arable land in Gali (but remain wary of returning permanently) migrate each summer to tend to their hazelnut and mandarin crops, returning to Zugdidi during the winter. Many other IDPs have found themselves stuck between having

land to farm but no home in Gali or having a home (usually a collective housing center) in Georgia but no land or work. IDPs who have returned to their homes in Gali manage to survive by selling hazelnuts and mandarins, or by small scale trading of goods from Georgia. These returnees nevertheless face daily harassment, bureaucratic obstacles and high and often arbitrary taxes and fines imposed by Abkhaz officials.

¶4. The "Tea Plantation" collective center is a twenty minute drive from Zugdidi, remotely located atop a hill at the end of a long, winding dirt road. Approximately 85 IDPs live in dorms with drooping roofs and warped floors that formerly served as homes for workers at the plantation. The plantation, which is no longer operating, was privatized by the Georgian government three years ago, though no one knows what plans the new owner has for the complex. IDPs living here are thus stuck in decrepit two-story dorms, crumbling from age and neglect, because no one is willing to invest money into their repair out of fear that once the repairs are finished, the owner will kick the IDPs out and sell the property for a profit. The plantation's remote location makes it difficult for the IDPs living there to find work in Zugdidi, and all the families we spoke with relied exclusively on their 27 lari/month stipend, renting land from locals to grow food crops. A few IDPs from the collective center have returned to Gali, but the majority cannot because they have no place to go. Several saw their houses burned down during the war, while others from Ochimchire and further north said Abkhaz legal restrictions and general hostility to Georgians has kept them away.

Abkhaz bureaucratic harassment

-----  
TBILISI 00001241 002 OF 003

¶5. According to the UN human rights office in Gali, IDP returnees are regularly harassed by local Abkhaz administration officials, border guards and customs officials, though in practice this seems more prevalent in the town of Gali and north toward Ochimchire. The UN human rights officer, Ryszard Komenda, characterized this harassment as more ethnic discrimination than physical intimidation and threats of violence. Much of the harassment exists to make everyday life a chore for ethnic Georgians who have returned - forcing them to return 2-3 times to government offices to complete routine paperwork, imposing arbitrary taxes on goods bought and sold, and subjecting those crossing administrative borders to lengthy questioning and demands for bribes. Zugdidi residents deal with frequent closings of the main bridge over the Inguri river and are often forced to pay bribes as high as 1000 rubles (USD 40) each time they cross.

¶6. The 2005 Abkhaz citizenship law added another layer to this official harassment, making it much harder for ethnic Georgians living in Gali to conduct routine business without an Abkhaz "passport." Gali residents cannot open a bank account, (legally) own property or travel beyond Gali without one. The Gali district is the last district in Abkhazia to undergo the Abkhaz passportization process, which began there in March 2008. Komenda said there has not been much interest from IDP returnees in getting passports because they do not see any real benefits to gaining Abkhaz citizenship, nor has there been much pressure (yet) from Abkhaz authorities to force the issue. He noted that while they issue as many as 400 new Abkhaz passports a week in Gagra, only four had been issued in Gali over the past few months. It is widely thought that de-facto president Bagapsh will push for more Gali residents to have passports by the end of the year, so they can vote in the upcoming 2009 'presidential' elections (note: Gali residents' support is widely thought to have secured Bagapsh's victory in the 2004 election. Gali residents can skirt the passport law by signing a (non-binding) waiver "renouncing" their Georgian citizenship, which allows them to keep their Georgian passport, though not many have done so, perhaps out of concern that they will lose

their IDP stipends paid by the Georgian government. End note).

#### Southern Gali

17. Abkhaz checkpoints and harassment by de-facto officials does not seem to be as pervasive in the southern part of Gali district, where ethnic Georgians can cross over into Georgia without having to cross the Inguri river. Poloff spoke with returnees from the villages of Otobaya and Nabakevi, recipients of UNHCR small business grants. Several of the returnees we spoke with had used the grants to set up small roadside kiosks, selling products purchased in Georgia. Others purchased dairy cows or seeds for growing crops. Nearly all supplemented their meager incomes by selling hazelnuts and mandarins, which grow in abundance in the region. Zurab, a returnee in the village of Otobaya, used UNHCR's USD 300 grant to build a small roadside kiosk, where he sells staples such as flour, sugar, oil, gum, and cigarettes purchased in Georgia. Despite the recent escalation of tension between Georgia and Abkhazia, he said he felt safe and has had no problems transporting goods across the administrative boundary. He also said he harvests between 300-400 kg of hazelnuts each year, selling them for about 3 lari/kg (about USD 2/kg), and netting between 750-1050 lari (USD 528-740) after paying taxes to Abkhaz de-facto authorities.

18. Most returnees are not as fortunate as Zurab, however. A UNHCR official noted that most families sell their hazelnut crops a year or more in advance to make ends meet, and harvest yields vary considerably. Taxes levied by the de-facto authorities are often arbitrary and steep. While Zurab said he paid only about 80 lari (USD 56) in taxes on his hazelnuts, some villages, particularly those north of Gali, are forced to pay a tax of 100-120kg of hazelnuts to the de-facto authorities. Those who have small hazelnut groves or a bad harvest are forced to buy nuts on the open market to pay the tax.

#### UN: Crime not a serious problem in Gali

19. The UN police observers stationed in Gali-Zugdidi noted that crime in Gali and Ochimchre was "not that bad" considering the size of the population (Note: this conversation took place before the recent string of bombings in Abkhazia, including the blast at a Gali cafe that killed an off-duty UN interpreter. End note). They said that out of a population of 95,000, they report between 2-8 crimes per

TBILISI 00001241 003 OF 003

month, mostly robberies or bride kidnappings. They characterized Georgian media reporting on the criminal situation in Gali as exaggerated, and the crimes that are reported are often ethnic Georgians targeting other ethnic Georgians. Because of the depressed economy and relative poverty of the population, there is not much to steal, save mandarins and hazelnuts - harvest season is when they see the largest spikes in criminal activity. They noted that Abkhaz police are largely corrupt and unprofessional, showing almost no interest in UN police training programs. They also assessed the feasibility of a joint Georgian-Abkhaz police force to be remote at best, given the inherent mistrust between the sides and the vast gap in professional standards between the two police forces.

TEFFT